

The Learning Curve: Student Protests in Serbia, 1991-2000

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Paper prepared for presentation at the Eleventh Annual Graduate Workshop, Kokkalis Program on Southeastern and East-Central Europe, Harvard University, February 12-13, 2009. Funding for this research was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2007-2009 SSHRC Post-Doctoral Fellowship).

Abstract

Using the case of Serbia's Otpor, this paper argues that strategic innovation is vital to the positive outcome of nonviolent resistance in non-democracies. The study traces how Otpor has developed a novel toolkit of protest strategies by drawing lessons from earlier mobilization efforts of students in March 1991, June-July 1992, and 1996-1997. The analysis demonstrates that Otpor increased the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance by developing an extensive non-hierarchical network of activists, creating a culture of resistance, attributing the blame for the plight of ordinary citizens to the incumbent president, forging ties with civil society actors, and pushing the opposition to unite. This study seeks to contribute to the social movement literature on nonviolent resistance by unraveling the extent of political learning in a repressive political regime.

Student activism has been a prominent feature of Serbian protests in the 1990s. In March 1991, Belgrade students sided with the opposition parties against the government's crackdown on the mass media and the violent repression of citizens' grievances. The next year students rallied under the slogan "Dosta" (Enough) to demand the resignation of Slobodan Milošević, the schedule of new parliamentary elections, and the removal of restrictive university laws. Yet the government stifled dissent, and the country plunged further into political turmoil and ethnic violence. The winter of 1996-1997 has seen another large-scale outburst of student activism. For several weeks, students marched through the streets of Belgrade under the slogan "Pravo" (Justice), calling for the recognition of citizens' votes for the coalition Zajedno and the reinstatement of university autonomy. Though the opposition received a lot of seats in city councils, the protest action failed to change the nature of the regime. In this suffocating political environment, the youth movement Otpor (Resistance) was formed to galvanize public support for dramatic political change, break the atmosphere of fear, and pressure the opposition into uniting around one candidate. Thousands of young people joined Otpor to bring down the repressive regime.

This paper examines how Otpor assumed a leadership role in nonviolent resistance to the autocratic ruler by drawing lessons from earlier mobilization efforts in Serbia. Based upon the author's interviews with former youth movement participants and media reports, the study traces cross-time variations in mobilization structures, framing processes, and protest strategies. The analysis reveals how Otpor set itself apart from earlier student protests and political rallies. First, Otpor developed an extensive non-hierarchical network of activists in the regions. By the time of the 2000 election, the

social movement had more than 70,000 members in 130 branches across the country. Second, Otpor shifted all the blame for the plight of Serbian people on Milošević. The social movement launched both a negative campaign (*Gotov Je!*) to expose weaknesses of the regime and a positive campaign (*Vreme Je!*) to boost voter turnout. Third, the youth movement applied a novel toolkit of nonviolent methods of resistance. Going beyond the mundane spectacle of protest rallies, Otpor created a culture of resistance and used humor to undermine the regime. Moreover, Otpor won public support by establishing a clear distance from the opposition political parties.

Analysis of mobilization efforts by Serbian youth is used here to support the argument that strategic innovation is vital to the positive outcome of protracted nonviolent resistance in non-democracies. Strategic innovation – experimentation with organizational structure, frames, and protest strategies – is, to a large extent, a product of learning from previous mobilization efforts. The failure to accomplish a goal of the protest campaign can either diminish the likelihood of subsequent mobilization or strengthen the commitment of activists to political struggle. In particular, the loss can provide an incentive for strategic innovation. Most previous research has examined processes of strategic innovation within a single social movement across time or across social movements within the same time span. Much less attention has been devoted to the effects of previous collective campaigns on the protest strategies of a social movement. Furthermore, analysis of strategic innovation of challenger organizations, or lack thereof, is critical to account for the survival of contemporary authoritarian regimes. This study seeks to contribute to the growing social movement literature on nonviolent resistance by unraveling the extent of political learning in a repressive political regime.

The rest of the paper proceeds in the following manner. The next section situates this research within existing social movement literature. Section 3 compares mobilization efforts organized by students in the 1990s. Section 4 is devoted to the analysis of strategic innovation by the social movement Otpor. The paper concludes by charting areas for future research.

Strategic Innovation and Social Movement Outcomes

This inquiry begins by distinguishing between different forms of collective action. Many protests erupt in reaction to a specific event or public policy and quickly dissipate in the absence of a permanent organizational base. Marwell and Oliver (1984: 12) coin the term “collective campaign” to describe “an aggregate of collective events or activities that appear to be oriented toward some relatively specific goal or good, and that occur within proximity in space and time.”¹ In contrast, social movements involve more complex and protracted interactions between challengers and their opponents. McAdam (1982: 25) defines social movements as “organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation.”² In non-democracies, the incumbent government is a primary target of challenger organizations.

Numerous scholarly efforts have been undertaken to specify the political impact of collective action.³ Empirical research is compounded by the fact that a multiplicity of

¹ Marwell, Gerald and Pamela Oliver. 1984. “Collective Action Theory and Social Movements Research.” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change* 7: 1–27.

² McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Amenta, Edwin and Michael P.Young. 1999. “Making an Impact: Conceptual and Methodological Implications of the Collective Goods Criterion.” In *How Social Movements Matter*, eds. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 22–41; O’Brien, Kevin

actors, including social movements, political parties, interest groups, and mass media, may influence the outcome of mass mobilization. In this paper, I consider student protests as successful if they not only win concessions from the ruling party, but also produce a lasting change in the political system. The fact that student protesters pursued a number of goals, distinct from those of the opposition parties, facilitates the task of isolating political effects of youthful collective action.

In recent years, a burgeoning body of research has adopted an interactive approach to the study of social movements.⁴ This line of inquiry posits that challengers and their opponents regularly modify their strategies through episodes of interaction with each other.⁵ Under these circumstances, strategic innovation becomes vital to the survival of challenger organizations, especially in the hostile political environment. In turn, the effectiveness of strategic innovation hinges upon a combination of external (political opportunity structure) and internal (movement characteristics) factors. The conceptualization of these factors is briefly discussed in the remainder of the section.

A principal argument of political process theory is that changes in the political opportunity structure affect the movement outcome.⁶ Political opportunity structure refers to “consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the

and Lianjiang Li. 2005. “Popular Contention and Its Impact in Rural China.” *Comparative Political Studies* 38 (3): 235–259.

⁴ Beckwith, Karen. 2000. “Strategic Innovation in the Pittson Coal Strike.” *Mobilization* 5 (2): 179–199; Dugan, Kimberley and Jo Reger. 2006. “Voice and Agency in Social Movement Outcomes.” *Qualitative Sociology* 29 (4): 467–484; Karapin, Roger. 2007. *Protest Politics in Germany: Movements on the Left and Right since the 1960s*. University Park: Pennsylvania State Press; Minkoff, Debra. 1999. “Bending with the Wind: Strategic Change and Adoption by Women’s and Racial Minority Organizations.” *American Journal of Sociology* 104: 1666–1703.

⁵ McAdam, Doug. 1983. “Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency.” *American Sociological Review* 48 (6): 735–754.

⁶ For a review, see Meyer, David S. and Debra C. Minkoff. 2004. “Conceptualizing Political Opportunity.” *Social Forces* 82 (4): 1457–1492.

political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics.”⁷ There is a broad agreement in the literature that greater access to political participation, increasing elite divisions, and enlistment of third-party support increases the effectiveness of mass mobilization. In particular, student protesters in non-democracies tend to depend upon the unity of opposition parties to propel a democratic breakthrough and fill the political space with a potent political force.⁸ Yet political defeats, rather than openings in the political opportunity structure, are likely to provide an incentive for experimentation with protest strategies.⁹

By the same token, there is mixed evidence about the relationship between protest and repression.¹⁰ Numerous studies find that repression has a direct negative effect on protest by raising the costs of civic activism. Others argue that repression indirectly increases the propensity of individuals to join a social movement by fostering a sense of public indignation over illegitimate political violence.¹¹ Inconclusive results about the relationship between repression and protest may derive, in part, from divergent effects of various coercive measures. Empirical research from South Africa and the West Bank indicates that high levels of repression diminish the odds of protest, whereas low levels of

⁷ Tarrow, Sidney. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 19-20.

⁸ On the importance of united opposition, see McFaul, Michael. 2005. “Transitions from Postcommunism.” *Journal of Democracy* 16 (July): 5–19.

⁹ On this point, see McCammon, Holly. 2003. “Out of the Parlors and into the Streets: The Changing Tactical Repertoire of US Women’s Suffrage Social Movements.” *Social Forces* 81 (3): 787–818.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive discussion of the literature, see Davenport, Christian, Hank Johnston and Carol Mueller, eds. 2005. *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Literature from advanced industrial democracies often uses a more neutral term – “the policing of protest” – to describe police intervention and handling of protest events, but reference to repression is more appropriate in a non-democratic context. della Porta, Donatella and Reiter Herbert, eds. 1998. *Policing Protest: The Control of Mass Demonstrations in Western Democracies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹¹ Opp, Karl-Dieter and Wolfgang Rühl. 1990. “Repression, Micromobilization and Political Protest.” *Social Forces* 69 (2): 521–547.

repression instigate further protest.¹² Yet Rasler (1996) finds that repression had a short-term (one-week lag) negative effect and a long-term (six-week lag) positive effect on overall levels of protest during the Iran's revolution, controlling for the severity of repression.¹³ Another perspective suggests that the consistency of state policies of repression and concession weakens the opposition, whereas "inconsistent signaling" reveals the vulnerability of the regime and, thus, triggers an increase in protest events.¹⁴

One mechanism through which repression might exert long-term positive effects on protest is related to organizational remnants of past mobilization. Almeida (2003) argues that a wave of protest creates an organizational structure that survives repression and can become activated during the opening-up of the political opportunity structure.¹⁵ Similarly, this study advances the proposition that past history of activism increases the odds of successful mobilization, in the long run, through political learning.

Turning to internal movement characteristics, the literature singles out mobilizing structures, framing processes, and protest strategies. For youth movements, universities provide a valuable site for recruitment.¹⁶ More specifically, universities in capital cities, with history of student activism, tend to host a receptive audience for the movement's message. In addition, the organizational structure of the social movement is critical to

¹² Khawaja, Marwan. 1993. "Repression and Popular Collective Action: Evidence from the West Bank." *Sociological Forum* 8 (1): 47–71; Olivier, Johan L. 1991. "State Repression and Collective Action in South Africa, 1970- 1984." *South African Journal of Sociology* 22:109–117.

¹³ Low levels of repression refer to "the breakup of mass arrests during and after demonstrations, or the arrest of a major opposition leader. High (severe) forms of repression involve general policies, such as bans on assemblies, press censorship, and martial law," p. 38. Rasler, Karen. 1996. "Concessions, Repression, and Political Protest in the Iranian Revolution." *American Sociological Review* 61 (1): 132–152.

¹⁴ Francisco, Ronald A. and Mark I. Lichbach. 2001. "Choice or Chance? Microrationality and Macrorandomness in Polish Conflict, 1980-1995." Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, September, San Francisco.

¹⁵ Almeida, Paul D. 2003. "Opportunity Organizations and Threat-Induced Contention: Protest Waves in Authoritarian Settings." *American Journal of Sociology* 109 (2): 345–400.

¹⁶ van Dyke, Nella. 1998. "Hotbeds of Activism: Locations of Student Protest." *Social Problems* 45 (2): 205–220.

mobilizing rank-and-file members and fostering creativity. Whereas bureaucratization of social movements is usually positively linked to policy outcomes in democratic states,¹⁷ decentralization tends to facilitate the survival of system challengers in non-democracies. A critical advantage of the non-hierarchical structure is an uninterrupted flow of ideas and continued resistance in the face of state repressions against prominent activists.

Another important characteristic of the social movement is the capacity to craft effective political messages.¹⁸ This communication process involves the use of frames that resonate with the target audience. According to Snow and Benford (1992: 137), frame “refers to an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment.”¹⁹ As a persuasive device, the frame allows movement participants to identify a problem, specify the target, and offer motivation for action.

Moreover, scholars point out that the movement outcome depends upon the choice of protest strategies.²⁰ Though a range of protest tactics seems to be limitless, protesters tend to resort to a recurrent toolkit of contentious collective action. In his seminal work, Tilly (1978) demonstrates how it takes such macrohistorical factors as the rise of the nation-state and the emergence of new communication technologies to

¹⁷ Giugni, G. Marco. 1998. “Was It Worth the Effort? The Outcomes and Consequences of Social Movements.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 371–393.

¹⁸ Franceschet, Susan. 2004. “Explaining Social Movement Outcomes: Collective Action Frames and Strategic Choices in First- and Second-Wave Feminism in Chile.” *Comparative Political Studies* 37 (5): 499–530; Payerhin, Marek and Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh. 2006. “On Movement Frames and Negotiated Identities: The Case of Poland’s First Solidarity Congress.” *Social Movement Studies* 5 (2): 91–115.

¹⁹ Snow, David A. and Robert Benford. 1992. “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest.” In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon Morris and Carol McClug Mueller. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 133–155.

²⁰ For a review, see Taylor, Verta and Nella van Dyke. 2004. “‘Get Up, Stand Up’: Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements.” In *Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 262–293.

engender novel forms of protest.²¹ Tilly (1995) conceptualizes a repertoire of contention as “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice”²² The use of novel and unorthodox protest tactics is likely to caught the authorities off guard and produce a stronger political impact than the deployment of familiar protest tactics.

(R)evolution: From Despair to Resistance

This inquiry treats student protests in 1991, 1992 and 1996-1997 as a series of “collective campaigns” for several reasons. First, demonstrators pursued a specific set of goals related to changes in the university management or the incumbent government. Second, student protests were bound by time, ranging from five days in 1991 to 119 days in 1996-1997. Third, the geographical scale of the protests was quite limited, often constrained to the confines of the capital city. Finally, protesters lacked a permanent organizational base, and ad hoc protest committees ceased to exist shortly after the end of a protest campaign. The section provides a synopsis of protest events, with the focus on mobilizing structures, framing processes, and protests strategies of each protest campaign. A summary of protest attributes is presented in Appendix 1.

March 1991

The protest rally organized by Vuk Drašković, leader of the Serbian Renewal Party (SPO), on March 9, 1991 marks one of the first large-scale protests against Milošević.

Though Drašković issued a narrow political demand – the resignation of top officials

²¹ Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Institutionalization*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

²² Tilly, Charles. 1995. “Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834.” In *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 26.

from the state-controlled Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), more than 100,000 people poured into the street to voice their discontent with the government. The police violently dispersed the crowd by bashing protesters with batons and using water canons and tear gas.²³ At least 200 people were injured and 100 protesters were arrested. Moreover, for the first time since the end of World War II, the tanks of the Yugoslav National Army rolled into the city as a demonstration of military might against civilians.

The next day, despite police beating and the blockade of Branko's Bridge (linking student dormitories in Novi Beograd and the city's downtown), thousands of students attended a protest rally in front of Terazije Fountain. To the list of their demands, they added the resignation of the Minister of Interior Radmilo Bogdanović responsible for police violence. On March 11, Milosević orchestrated a counter-rally and ordered busing his supporters from other parts of Serbia, but then he conceded to the protesters' demands. The unpopular minister and the TV editors were removed from office. Milosević, however, quickly regained control over the political situation and diverted citizens' attention to the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia. Thousands of young people, including student activists, fled the country to avoid military conscription.

Still, the March 1991 protest created a conspicuous opportunity for students' engagement in politics. On the spur of the moment, the Forum of Terazije Parliament (*Forum terazijskog parlamenta*) was formed to act as "a restraint on both the regime and the opposition."²⁴ To minimize any political manipulations associated with student protests, the student protest committee held meetings with public figures and

²³ The event claimed lives of two people, a student and a police officer. On police violence, see *B92 Online*. 2007. "March 1991 Protest Legacy." March 9; Lukovic, Petar. 2000. "The March 9 Legacy." *Balkan Crisis Report* March 7; Pakula, Andrew. 1991. "Letter from Belgrade." *Peace Magazine* 7 (4): 11-14.

²⁴ Šušak, Bojana. 2000. "An Alternative to War." In *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*, ed. Neboiša Popov. Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 479–508, p. 500.

journalists.²⁵ For its peaceful character, the protest campaign was dubbed Plush (R)evolution (*Plišana (r)evolucija*). Overall, the most significant outcome of this student mobilization was the exposure of the generational division in Serbian society.²⁶

June-July 1992

In June 1992, UN economic sanctions against Yugoslavia and a restrictive draft law on universities sparked another student protest.²⁷ Young people audaciously demanded the resignation of Milošević and the disbandment of the national parliament. This time, students opted to shift the site of their protest from the street to the university. For 26 days, Belgrade students occupied university buildings refusing to put their lives on hold.²⁸ “Enough! We want to live now!” read a slogan from that period.

A major difference between the 1991 and the 1992 student protest is its isolation from the opposition and the weight of its activities on the university grounds. Both the ruling elite and the opposition parties condemned the student protest. The state-controlled media presented the takeover of university buildings as a frivolous party and an excuse for reckless entertainment in the midst of the raging war. The government further

²⁵ For example, the biweekly *Republika* ran a two-page story based upon interviews with N. Popov, M. Stefanović, O. Kavran, Lj. Topalovic, R. Radovanović, and A. Lojpur. Indjić, Trivo. 1991. “*Republika* je posetila Forum terazijskog parlamenta.” *Republika* (April 15-30): 8-9.

²⁶ Gordy, Eric D. 1999. *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, p. 43. In the book, Gordy (1999: 52) reports pronounced age differences in party preferences of Serbs in 1991. According a national representative survey, only 12 percent of respondents under 26 years old, compared to 43 percent of those over 46 years old, reported support for Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).

²⁷ Kuzmanović, Bora. 1993. *Studentski protest 1992: Socialno-psihološka studija društvenog događaja*. Belgrade: Institute of Psychology.

²⁸ There are four universities in Serbia, located in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Niš, and Novi Sad. In June 1992, students outside Belgrade also staged protest action. See Dordević, Dragoljub and Saša Dukić. 1992. *Sile mraka i bezumlja: niški studentski protest '92: pokušaj sociološke interpretacije*. Niš: Naucni podmladak SKC.

alienated the general public from students by circulating rumors that the protest had been orchestrated by the faculty and students of non-Serb ethnic background.

Given its wide-ranging demands and lack of broad-based support, the student protest was bound to failure. Furthermore, Belgrade University lost whatever autonomy it used to exercise. For his support of student protesters, the rector of the university Rajko Vracar was removed from office. In August 1992, the government adopted a new law on universities, asserting full control of the state over higher education establishments.

Rather than political, a tangible outcome of this student protest has been cultural, i.e. the reassertion of distinct youth culture.²⁹ In the course of several weeks, students have contributed to the Belgrade folklore by concocting anti-government slogans and rhymes, producing the print magazine “Dosta” and radio programs for B92. Furthermore, students organized meetings with prominent intellectuals and marched through the streets of Belgrade imitating the prison walk. The last symbolic event of this protest campaign was the funeral procession organized to commemorate the death of Belgrade University at the hands of the new university law.

November 1996 – March 1997

The government nullification of the 1996 municipal election results, denying opposition candidates seats in city councils, has triggered massive civic and student protests in 1996-1997.³⁰ The coalition Zajedno (Together) made up of Serbian Renewal Party (*Srpski*

²⁹ Prosic-Dvornic, Mirjana. 1993. “Enough! Student Protest’92: The Youth of Belgrade in Quest of ‘Another Serbia.’” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 11 (1-2).

³⁰ For an in-depth treatment of this topic, see Babović, Marija et al., eds. 1997. *Ajmo, Aide, Svi u Šetnju! Gradanski i Studentski Protest 96/97* [Let’s All Go for a Walk: Civic and Student Protests 96/97]. Belgrade: Medija Centar; Lazić, Mladen, ed. 1999. *Winter of Discontent: Protest in Belgrade*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Milić, Anđelka and Lilić, Lilić. 1998. *Generacija u Protestu* [Generation in Protest]. Belgrade: University of Belgrade Press.

Pokret Obnove, SPO), Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*, DS), Civic Alliance of Serbia, Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS), and Democratic Center organized protest rallies in the late afternoon,³¹ while students held daily protest walks around noon. Young people gathered on campus and marched downtown holding high their matriculation cards. In addition to the recognition of stolen votes, the student protest pressed for the resignation of Dragutin Velicković, rector of Belgrade University, and Vojin Djurdjević, the student vice-chancellor. More broadly, the goal of the student protest was summarized through its key slogan “Pravo” (Justice).

The mobilization of students occurred through student protest committees formed in almost each faculty of Belgrade University. In addition, the Main Council of Student Protest was set up. Dusan Vasiljević, a 23-year old political science student, acted as the spokesperson for the student protest campaign. Furthermore, students published their own newsletter titled *Boom*, aired their news reports via the student radio station, and posted information on the official web sites of student protests.³² Outside Belgrade, students also protested against the nullification of municipal election results.

Through symbolic action, students expressed their contempt for government institutions.³³ In both civic and student protests, whistle-blowing has been a signature element of the protest walk. On top, students employed a variety of low-cost tools to get their message across. On November 29, student protesters tossed toilet paper at the

³¹ For a description of Serbia’s political parties see Bugajski, Janusz. 2002. *Political Parties in Eastern Europe: A Guide to Politics in the Post-Communist Era*. Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe.

³² At Belgrade University, School of Electrical Engineering, School of Mechanical Engineering, School of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and School of Philosophy have created special web sites to disseminate protest-related information. Notably, the home pages of the student protests contained a statement denying the connection of student protests to political parties and warning against any provocation in this regard.

³³ For a daily account of the 1996-1997 student protests, visit the home page of the Student Protest of the School of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, University of Belgrade. The mirror web site is <http://www.yuope.com/mirrors/protest96/pmf/index.html> (accessed on December 15, 2008).

building of the Electoral Commission and shouted, “We’ve had enough of this s__t.” On December 1, condoms were thrown at the building of the Supreme Court for succumbing to political pressures of the ruling party. On another occasion, protesters threw eggs at the building of RTS. Students also drew graffiti on the building of the National Parliament with the chalk used as a disinfection method against cockroaches in local households. On the New Year’s Eve, youth put on display the rubber reptile carrying the sign “the last Slobosaurus” (referring to the first name of Milošević). Young people created a vibrant, carnivalesque atmosphere that lasted until the victorious march on March 20, exuding jubilation over the resignation of Velicković and Djurdjević.

Serbian youth not only captured public attention, but also gained mass support. According to the surveys of student protesters taken in 1992 and 1997, 38 percent of parents in 1992 and 53 percent of parents in 1997 supported the participation of their children in the protest event.³⁴ Moreover, student activists revised their interaction style with the police. Instead of instigating overt confrontation, protesters sought to reach out to the police officers. For example, students staged a beauty contest, titled Miss Student Protest 1996-97 (*Izbor za mis studentskog protesta*) in front of the police cordons.³⁵ In addition, a delegation of student activists secured a promise from Monicilo Perišić, general of the Yugoslav Army, that he would not deploy the armed forces to intervene in the ongoing political confrontation.³⁶

³⁴ Popadić, Dragan. 1997. “Studentski protesti – uporedna analiza studentskih protesta 1992 i 1996/97” [Student Protests – a Comparative Analysis of Student Protests in 1992 and 1996/97]. In *‘Ajmo, ‘Aide, Svi u Šetnju! Gradanski i Studentski Protest 96/97*, pp. 65-76.

³⁵ Welch, Matt. 1997. “A Street-Level Account of Milošević’s Biggest Challenge Yet.” *Pozor Magazine* January 15.

³⁶ Cohen, Leonard. 2002. *Serpent in the Bosom: Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, p. 299.

The autocratic government responded to mass protests in a predictable manner. On 24 December 1996, a counter-rally organized by the ruling elite was held in Belgrade. To demonstrate popular support for the president, the state-controlled television showed the crowd shouting, “Slobo, we love you!” In February 1997, the government increased the presence of the police in the streets and stepped up political violence. Several dozen students were arrested and sentenced to prison.³⁷

A major lesson that student activists have learned from the 1996-1997 protest was that they could not count on the support of the opposition parties. “The 1996-1997 student protests were not supported by political parties, they were used by politicians,” a civic activist noted.³⁸ Once Milošević promised the coalition *Zajedno* seats in city councils, the politicians called off protest rallies. From mid February to late March, students continued their protest campaign by themselves. By summer 1997, the acrimonious power struggle between Vuk Drašković and Zoran Djindjić for opposition leadership and the presidential candidacy reached a high point, causing the breakdown of the coalition and, thus, undermining the short-term gains of the protest campaign.

Another positive outcome of the student protest has been the emergence of a skilled student leadership and new mobilizing structures. According to a survey of the 1996-1997 student activists, three-fourths of them participated in earlier student protests.³⁹ The Main Council of the Student Protest initiated the creation of Student Parliament. In spring 1997, approximately 11,000 students participated in the election of

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of police arrests and court trials, see Kandić, Nataša and Lazar Stojanović, eds. 1997. *Political Use of Political Violence during the 1996-1997 Protests in Serbia*. Belgrade: Humanitarian Law Center.

³⁸ The author’s interview with T. A.

³⁹ Cohen (2002), p. 258.

a newly-formed 70-member student body.⁴⁰ Slobodan Homen became the chair of the Student Parliament and, later, played a leadership role in Otpor. Another group of former student activists under the leadership of Aleksa Grgurević set up Student Initiative, NGO-like group that sought to improve the lives of students at universities. In addition, Cedomir Jovanović formed Student Political Club to push for regime change and nation-building processes in Serbia.

Notwithstanding political learning by student protesters and incremental changes in the political environment, student protest campaigns in the 1990s failed to put an end to repressive measures of the incumbent president and rampant violations of human rights. As one former Otpor activist put it, “We realized that we shouldn’t fight against the consequences of Milošević’s regime. We had to fight against the source of all problems – Milošević himself. We decided that we would put all the blame on Milošević.”⁴¹ The next section details how the social movement Otpor deployed a new toolkit of protest strategies and assumed a leadership role in bringing down the repressive political regime.

Nonviolent Resistance by Otpor

Otpor started as a group of a dozen university students in October 1998, but grew to a movement of more than 70,000 in the run-up to the early presidential election on 24 September 2000. Since its inception, the social movement articulated three specific demands: (1) free and fair elections, (2) depoliticized universities, and (3) press freedom.

⁴⁰ Zoran, Nicolić. 1997. “Students Divided: Belgrade - Struggle against Genes.” *AIM* 8 September, <http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/trae/archive/data/199709/70912-029-trae-beo.htm> (accessed December 1, 2008).

⁴¹ The author’s interview with D. R.

Yet, unlike earlier mobilization efforts, Otpor has committed itself toward the long-term goal of removing Milošević from power. Over the course of two years, Otpor has deftly undermined the pillars of the regime's strength and has creatively built support for its cause. Which factors have contributed to the success of the social movement? How different was Otpor from earlier mobilization efforts by young people in Serbia? This section of the paper seeks to address these issues.

First, Otpor built a horizontal, leaderless structure that span more than one hundred Serbian towns. A veteran of the 1996-1997 protest and a former Otpor activist pointed out that “a lesson that we have learnt from 1996 was that it was important not to have visible leaders.”⁴² Otpor rotated its spokespeople each fortnight, but delivered the same political message. This tactic baffled the authorities who got used to co-opting or dividing a handful of the opposition leaders. In addition, the rotation of Otpor spokespeople has bolstered a popular belief in the spectacular growth of the movement's membership. Otpor recognized the power of numbers and the importance of the messenger. “You cannot defeat the government by imposing sanctions on it or outspending it. But you can accomplish it by gaining numbers,” former Otpor activist said.⁴³

Second, Otpor activists devised numerous ways to maintain a sense of solidarity and strengthen commitment to the movement's cause. In 1992, the protest campaign ran out of steam when universities closed down for a summer break. In contrast, Otpor leadership was intent on organizing a constant campaign. “The movement never stopped to be present. We live in a consumer society, whereby people tend to forget fast a

⁴² The author's interview with S. D.

⁴³ The author's interview with S. P.

campaign, and Otpor constantly organized some action, ” former Otpor activist recalled.⁴⁴ This strategy has boosted the movement’s visibility and has given members a feeling of accomplishment.

Third, the social movement has created a culture of resistance. The framing of the key protest message has progressed from bare emotions (Enough, 1992) and specific demands (Justice, 1996-1997) to direct action (Resistance, 1998-2000). The symbol of the clenched fist has permeated the public space through graffiti, stickers, badges, T-shirts, and other promotional material. “It is amazing how people notice branding in their everyday life, but underestimate it in nonviolent struggle,” a former Otpor activist said.⁴⁵ On an unprecedented scale, Otpor activists applied a wide range of marketing ideas to build the movement’s popularity. By 2000, it has become “cool” to be a member of Otpor. The social movement has gained recognition for “saying things that older people were afraid to say.”⁴⁶

Fourth, the social movement forged ties with other civil society actors. The campaign *Vreme Je!* (It’s Time) involved 37 NGOs, along with the media support of Radio B92 and the Association of Independent Electronic Media.⁴⁷ Through local survey firms, Otpor obtained information about political attitudes of various segments of Serbian society. The fact that 500,000 young people would become eligible to vote in the 2000 election caught the movement’s attention. Opinion polls indicated that young people were more likely to vote against Milošević than older age groups, but only five percent of first-time voters exercised their right to vote in the previous election. To increase youth

⁴⁴ The author’s interview with A. D.

⁴⁵ The author’s interview with S. P.

⁴⁶ The author’s interview with N.B.

⁴⁷ Paunović, Zarko et al. 2000. *Exit 2000: Non-governmental Organizations for Democratic and Fair Elections*. Belgrade: Verzal Printing House.

turnout, Otpor developed a detailed plan of action. Testifying to the success of the voter campaign, almost 86 percent of 18-29 years old voters cast their ballot in the 2000 election.⁴⁸

In addition, Otpor effectively expanded the political opportunity structure by pushing for the unity of the opposition. “In the beginning, forty percent of our campaign efforts were spent on making the opposition unite. Until the opposition parties were blackmailed, until they realized that they were losing their supporters, they wouldn’t unite,” said a former Otpor activist.⁴⁹ Otpor activists contrived a provocative slogan to shame the opposition for its internal factionalism and repeatedly inserted the derogatory phrase in their public speeches. At one point, Otpor managed to bring several opposition leaders onto the stage and asked them to hold a huge Serbian flag signifying the unity of the opposition.

Fifth, Otpor developed a “fraternizing approach” to the police. In the early 1990s, protesters used to shout “haw-haw” to the police, implying that the police officers were dogs serving their master. Otpor decided to turn the police into the allies by showing affection for them. The color of both the police uniform and the national soccer team was blue (plavi). At soccer games, Serbs would shout “Plavi!” in support of the national team. Similarly, Otpor members chanted “plavi” to the police officers to get them on the challenger’s side or, at least, reduce the likelihood of violence toward protesters.

Furthermore, Otpor gained access to unparalleled resources provided by the international donor community.⁵⁰ Once “Milošević’s image has changed from a

⁴⁸ Paunović (2000), p. 39.

⁴⁹ The author’s interview with S. P.

⁵⁰ Earlier mobilization efforts were conducted on a much smaller scale, albeit student activists have made moderate attempts to do fundraising. For example, Dusan Vasiljević, spokesperson for the Student Protest

peacemaker from Dayton to a butcher from the Balkans,”⁵¹ Serbia’s civil society caught the attention of foreign donors. In the aftermath of NATO bombing, the United States increased its financial aid to civil society actors in Serbia. Otpor has become a major beneficiary of the change in US foreign policy. Yet, given the preponderance of anti-American sentiments in Serbian society, Otpor publicly denied any US connection. Back in the Milošević period, when asked to comment on the sources of their financial support, Otpor activists preferred to make vague references to the Serbian diaspora. The incoming financial resources allowed Otpor activists to realize their protest ideas. As a former Otpor activist noted, “We [Otpor members] didn’t need Gene Sharp’s book to generate ideas. We have protested for 10 years. Most people who participated in the 1992 protest joined protests in 1996-1997. We just needed money to print our material.”⁵²

Over the course of two years, Otpor has transformed itself from the youth movement into the civic movement. Thousands of young people have drawn their parents and relatives into the nonviolent struggle against Milošević. When the number of youngsters’ arrests has dramatically increased in 2000, a group of concerned mothers in Novi Sad formed Otpor Mothers.⁵³ “It was time of genuine friendship and camaraderie. It didn’t exist in any political organization. People were interested in only one thing – how to topple Milošević,” a member of Otpor Mothers said.⁵⁴ Through its creative and well-

of 1996-1997, and Oliver Dulić, member of the Initiative Council of the Student Protest, traveled to Italy in March 1997 to raise funds for the student radio station Index. This information was disclosed in *Boom*, Issue 42, March 14, 1997.

⁵¹ The author’s interview with S. H.

⁵² The author’s interview with A. M.

⁵³ Markov, Slobodanka and Marija Kleut. 2005. “Women in the Popular Movement Resistance (Otpor) in Novi Sad 2000.” *Gender Studies* 1 (4): 162-170.

⁵⁴ The author’s interview with V. T.

planned nonviolent resistance, Otpor has succeeded in mobilizing the population and bringing about a sweeping political change.

Conclusion

Using the case of Serbia during the Milošević period, this study has demonstrated how mobilization after loss can create room for political learning. The 1990s have been punctuated with several outbursts of student activism in Serbia. With various degrees of success, students affirmed the political significance of youth and generational divisions within the society through protests in March 1991, June-July 1992, and 1996-1997. But the outcome of these protest campaigns had a fleeting impact on the political system. Each time the ruling elite have responded by reconsolidating the regime and regaining social control over society. By drawing lessons from previous mobilization efforts and introducing strategic innovations, the social movement Otpor managed to turn the situation around. Furthermore, by virtue of its success, Otpor has set a stunning example for young people and civic activists in other countries on how to organize resistance to the autocratic ruler.

There is a burgeoning body of research on the cross-national flow of ideas in the post-communist region.⁵⁵ Within a short span of time, the so-called colored revolutions unfolded in the Republic of Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). In these former Soviet republics, youth movements modeled on Otpor played a prominent role in mobilizing

⁵⁵ Beissinger, Mark R. 2007. "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions." *Perspectives on Politics* 5(2): 259–276; Bunce, Valerie J. and Sharon L Wolchik. 2006. "International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions." *Journal of Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 38(3): 283–304; Forbrig, Joerg and Pavol Demes, eds. 2007. *Reclaiming Democracy: Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe*. Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

citizens and pushing for free and fair elections.⁵⁶ Much less attention, however, has been devoted to the recent cases of failure. Zubr (Bison) in Belarus and Yokh (No), Yeni Fikir (New Thinking) and Magam (It's Time) in Azerbaijan have attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to mobilize youth and propel a democratic breakthrough.⁵⁷ Further research is necessary to specify conditions under which a model of nonviolent resistance fails to trigger a democratic breakthrough.

Another area for future research is the protest activity of Serbian youth in the post-Milošević period. Though the resignation of the autocratic ruler has expanded citizens' access to political participation and has sparked a resurgence of political pluralism, Serbia has yet to develop viable democratic institutions. In the meantime, Belgrade students continue to turn to the street to articulate their grievances. In October 2006, Student Union of Serbia, in partnership with other student organizations, launched a large-scale protest campaign against the rising costs of higher education.⁵⁸ On another occasion, a group of students mobilized and marched the streets of Belgrade to call for Serbia's fast integration into the European Union. Furthermore, over the past year, a wave of protests has swept the country and brought youth into the street to condemn Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. An in-depth analysis of these student protests will shed light on how young people modify their toolkit of protest strategies to facilitate the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance in a fragile democracy.

⁵⁶ Bunce, Valerie and Sharon Wolchik. 2006 "Youth and Electoral Revolutions in Slovakia, Serbia, and Georgia." *SAIS Review* 26 (2): 55–65; Collin, Mathew. 2007. *The Time of the Rebels: Youth Resistance Movements and 21st Century Revolutions*. London: Serpent's Tail; Nikolayenko, Olena. 2007. "The Revolt of the Post-Soviet Generation: Youth Movements in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine." *Comparative Politics* 39(2): 169–188.

⁵⁷ Marples, David. 2006. "Colored Revolutions: The Case of Belarus." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39: 351–364; Valiyev, Anar M. 2006. "Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: A Failed Revolution." *Problems of Post-Communist* 53 (3): 17–35.

⁵⁸ The official web site of the 2006 student protest is <http://protest.zbrka.net>.

Appendix 1. A Comparative Analysis of Student Protests, 1991-2000

	1991	1992	1996-97	1998-2000
Goals	Narrow Resignation of RTS top staff	Broad Resignation of Milošević Preservation of university autonomy	Narrow Recognition of Zajedno votes Resignation of the university rector and student vice- chancellor	Broad Resignation of Milošević
Organizational Structure	Forum of the Terazije Parliament	Student Inter-faculty Association (independent student union)	Protest Committee in each Faculty	Social Movement
Master Frame	Plush (r)evolution	Enough (Dosta)	Justice (Pravo)	Resistance (Otpor)
Main Protest Strategies	Protest Rallies Occupation of Terazije Square	Takeover of University Buildings	Protest Walks	Stickers, Graffiti Street Performances
Relation with the Opposition	Support for the Opposition	Alienation from the Opposition	Betrayal by the Opposition	Sustained Campaign for the Unity of the Opposition
Length of Protest	March 9-13 (5 days)	June 15-July 10 (26 days)	November 26, 1996 – March 20, 1997 (119 days)	October 1998 – October 2000 (2 years)
Geography of Protest	Belgrade	Belgrade Kragujevac Niš Novi Sad	Belgrade Kragujevac Niš Novi Sad A few towns	Belgrade Kragujevac Niš Novi Sad More than 100 towns
Outcome	Resignation of RTS top staff	Adoption of more restrictive university laws	Recognition of electoral results Resignation of the university rector and student vice- chancellor	Resignation of Milošević